Cross-Cultural Connection

An Indian American diplomat aims to advance the President's vision of U.S.-India relations.

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

Atul Keshap, the U.S. Embassy's deputy political counselor, believes India is going to be America's "most important bilateral relationship over the next century." And he envisions a scenario of millions of Indians and Americans traveling each year between both countries, not just visiting their families, selling, buying, studying and sight-seeing but also healing, discovering, inventing, investing, inspiring and joining in a partnership of shared democratic values to make the world safer, freer and more prosperous.

"My life, education, career, ancestry and origins make me believe that I should give all that I can to move that vision forward," says Keshap. "It's a happy accident of my career that I'm in India at a crucial moment in U.S.-India relations."

When he became a diplomat in 1994, one could say Keshap was joining the family business. His mother, Zoë Calvert, had worked for U.S. Ambassador Ellsworth Bunker from 1956 to 1961, in an office about 30 meters from where Keshap works now, during her first Foreign Service assignment. Her next posting was at the U.S. Embassy in London, where she met Keshap's father, Dr. Keshap Chander Sen, who later embarked on a U.N. career in Africa, Central and Southeast Asia and Europe. Atul Keshap's wife, Karen, is also a diplomat, an assistant information officer for the U.S. Embassy. Their three children live with them.

Keshap's job as a political officer is to increase understanding between India and the United States and to help the two governments work cooperatively together. "I get excited by the notion that we are finally building the kind of relationship with India that I, as an Indian American, would have liked to have seen occur 30, 40, 50, 60 years ago," says Keshap, 35. "For many years we were indifferent, if not antagonistic, toward each other. And lately, with a significant number of Indian Americans living in the United States, significant investment in India by American companies, enhanced educational links, enhanced travel links, you can see that our two countries are realizing that they share a common language, a common heritage, a common set of values, a common outlook on the world and should have been natural partners from the get-go."

ARUN KESHAP

Atul Keshap enjoys a shikara *ride on Dal Lake in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir.*

If the United States and India embrace the vision articulated by President George W. Bush during his March visit, "they will transform the world for the better, and will spread democracy and stability and free market prosperity," says Keshap. "Other countries working to achieve what India has achieved—a democratic, multiethnic, tolerant, pluralistic, liberal, free-market, stable country—can look to India and say, 'Wow, this is the way to do it.'"

Keshap encounters some people who may not share these views, but says,

"That's why I'm here, so I can go out and engage with people and have a respectful and open dialogue about differences of opinion and perception. America, to a lot of folks, may just mean what they watch on TV," he argues. "But it's still recognized as a land of opportunity and people want to replicate that sense of liberty and opportunity around the world. And you see that every day with Indian IT entrepreneurs and others who are taking control of their own destiny and not waiting for other institutions to catch up, but seeing that they have an opportunity to try to make their lives better and to contribute in their own way. And many take that inspiration directly from the ideals of our Founding Fathers."

Courtesy KAREN KESHAP

Atul Keshap; his mother, Zoë Calvert; Karen Keshap, James, Emily and Carolyn at Camel Camp Osian in Rajasthan this April.

Keshap was born in Nigeria as an American citizen during one of his father's assignments. He spent his first 12 years living in Nigeria, Lesotho, Zambia, Afghanistan and Austria; then the next 12 years in Charlottesville, Virginia, where he completed his studies at the University of Virginia. "I wanted a sense of belonging to one place, and that's what those 12 years gave me," he says. His mother and brothers still live there.

Keshap's father, now a U.S. citizen, lives in Mysore, where, coincidentally, Keshap's maternal great-grandfather helped supervise construction of the Sivasamudram hydroelectric project for General Electric over 100 years ago. Keshap's father was born in Muzaffargarh, in undivided Punjab. He had just finished college in Lahore when Partition came. Warned to flee, the family arrived by train in New Delhi in October 1947, eventually settling in Panipat, Haryana. After finishing university in New Delhi, Keshap's father worked eight years for the Punjab government in Shimla, earned his doctorate at the London School of Economics, met and married Keshap's mother, who is from North Carolina. They spent 30 years traveling in U.N. service.

Every summer, the family vacationed a few weeks each in the United States, Europe and India. "So I very much grew up with an understanding of both sides of my heritage," Keshap says. With his American accent and no prior knowledge of Hindi, he sometimes "felt like a stranger in a strange land" when trying clumsily to play cricket with cousins in Panipat or when touring India as a child. "But I received nine months of Hindi language training before I came out to India for this assignment. And it has unlocked a sense of comfort that I never had," he says. "If you speak English, you can speak to 300 million people in this country, but if you speak a little bit of Hindi, you can probably speak to an additional 300-, 400-, 500 million or more. So, I'm delighted with this rudimentary Hindi that I have and I use it as much as I can, even though it greatly pains most people to hear it." □

VIKAS NARULA

Karen Keshap at the U.S. Embassy

My Experiments with Hindi

By KAREN KESHAP

The shopkeeper in Rajasthan thought it was charming that I used my Hindi to negotiate a better price on my block print tablecloth. The ability to listen to Hindi conversations around me has proven hilarious and invaluable; hilarious when I answer a question that was asked about me but not to me and invaluable when it comes to directing the local taxi wallahs. But in the beginning Hindi was a daunting prospect.

Prior to my diplomatic assignment to India as the U.S. Embassy's assistant information officer for electronic media, I reported to the State Department's Foreign Service Institute for six months of Hindi language training.

Hindi can be an intimidating language with its different script and sounds. The first day, we spent four hours memorizing the Hindi script and alphabet. It was discouraging to realize at the end of that day that I had only learned the

Graphics by QASIM RAZA

first four letters. We would not learn any vowels for a week! By the end of three weeks, we knew the entire alphabet. Our instructors, NRIs from Lucknow, New Delhi, Gujarat and Punjab, had the class read through Hindi newspapers, finding simple words that we recognized. I staggered out of class with a pounding headache in those first weeks as my brain took a crash course in Devanagari.

As our proficiency grew, we discussed topics including the Ramayana, agriculture, gender issues, culture, weather, crime, politics, HIV/AIDS, shopping, terrorism, transportation and even cooking. My classmates were in the military and we studied vocabulary like: tactical, navy, general, aircraft and joint exercises. I also studied the names for family members—uncle, aunt, father's older brother's son—finally resorting to a family tree to track all the different titles Indians use to address their relatives, including *masijees*, *salijees* and *dadijees*.

One of the most helpful exercises was learning to give directions in Hindi to get from India Gate to Chandni Chowk and Old Delhi, including when to turn left, right, or cross a bridge. Our instructor moved a plastic orange horse all over a map of New Delhi, as we stopped to visit the railway station, took a swim in the river when we forgot the word for bridge, and finally ended up at the Jama Masjid. Practical applications such as this have proven very useful here in India, and my taxi Hindi has often come in handy.

Field trips were always a highlight: We interviewed Hindi speakers about their lives in the United States and in India. Our instructors took us to temples, mosques, grocery stores and restaurants, even the most current Bollywood films at a local cinema.

Studying Hindi was my job for six months, making it easier to focus on the language and absorb aspects of Indian culture. President George W. Bush's National Security Language Initiative will turn out many more folks like me—ordinary Americans who know, speak and understand Hindi. Many other American diplomats have taken the time to get to know Indian languages and culture through the opportunity afforded to us by the Department of State. Such knowledge has made me a more effective diplomat and opened a doorway for me to explore a vast, ancient and complex culture. The long-term implications of studying Hindi will make me and others like me more empathetic, and build bridges of trust and understanding. □

Americans Come to Learn Indian Languages

By RAMESH JAIN

Learning a language—somebody else's language—is a kind gesture. It's a gesture of interest," President George W. Bush said as he launched the National Security Language Initiative in January. "It really is a fundamental way to reach out to somebody and say, 'I care about you. I want you to know that I'm interested in not only how you talk but how you live.'"

Among the people that the U.S. government wants American citizens to care and know about are Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi and Urdu speakers in India. And 39 Americans have taken advantage of Critical Language Scholarships funded by a State Department pilot program to spend 10 weeks this summer among vernacular language communities, learning to speak, read, write and understand. They have been joined by another 51 young Americans—visiting India through other language learning programs—to be taught by the American Institute of Indian Studies, based in Gurgaon, Haryana. It is supported by a consortium of more than 50 American universities that teach Indian studies.

The 90 American students are expecting to apply their language skills in their careers and vocations. Cole H. Taylor, an anthropology undergraduate from Smith College, Massachusetts, is learning Hindi and hoping to use it in the field of human rights. "Certainly in the rural parts of India people don't speak English," she says. "So if I want to interact with various people, Hindi is going to be great. You're less likely to resolve conflicts if you don't understand the cultural, societal and historical background of the people you are engaging with."

Kerry C. San Chirico, a religious studies graduate from the University of California, Santa Barbara, says, "The scholarship is going to take me to a place that will make my Hindi better. I am doing a PhD in ethnographic work. Being able to read primary documents in Hindi and having on-the-ground discussions, interviews with local people, will help me learn about different cultures, too."

This is echoed by Colleen E. Kelly, a South Asian studies graduate from Cornell University. "My research is within the Urdu community around Lucknow, so by reading Urdu I will be able to complete my research in history," she said. "This scholarship will pay for my language study, allowing me to attend these classes without paying for anything, and it includes my living, board and travel expenses."

RAMESH JAIN

Marianne Craven of the State Department awards language scholarships in New Delhi.

The language program "strives for a collaborative environment in which learners take charge of their own learning by keeping track of their language development and language learning needs," says Purnima Mehta, director general of the American Institute of Indian Studies. "Students are expected to reach out for their instructors' help and to respectfully engage with the local host community for understanding the subtleties of cultural and linguistic variation."

The institute has arranged for the participants to live with communities that speak the languages they are learning. So the students of Bengali will be based in Calcutta, those learning Hindi will stay in Jaipur, the Urdu students will be in Lucknow and the Punjabi students in Patiala. The institute also encourages them to stay with host families. Besides classroom instruction and individual tutorials, film screenings and plays have been planned. □